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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000695

SIPDIS

STATE FOR INR/R/MR, IIP/T, IIP/G/NEA-SA, SA
SCA/CEN, SCA/PAB, SCA/INS, SCA/RA, SCA/PPD, DRL
CENTCOM PUBLIC AFFAIRS-MAJ.BALDWIN/SGT. BAKER
USCINCPAC FOR POLAD R. HUSO
SECDEF FOR PA

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KMDR KPAO OIIP PREL PGOV PHUM TX
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN MEDIA REACTION IN APRIL-MAY

REFTEL: (A) Ashgabat 466, (B) Ashgabat 565, (C) Ashgabat [Romanowski Media Reaction], (D) Ashgabat 587

SUMMARY
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¶1. (U) Media reaction to post events in April and May were overall very accurate and positive to major visitors and events, but the state media continued to ignore smaller security and cultural programs. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Steven Mann (Ref D) and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alina L. Romanowski's (Reftel Ashgabat [Romanowski Media Reaction]) visits garnered full and mostly positive media attention. The Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund failed to receive credit from state media for supporting two projects despite coverage of their completion in April and May.

POSITIVE TOWARDS OUR POLICIES
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¶2. (U) On April 18, pro-government website TURKMENISTAN.RU (Russian, English), based on a RIA Novosti (Russian) wire report, accurately quoted Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza as saying: "We are just trying to cultivate a new relationship with Turkmenistan, we feel we have the chance to open up an absolutely new chapter in our engagement with Turkmenistan. My colleagues who have visited there [Turkmenistan] since President Niyazov's death have been pleasantly surprised by the degree to which the new president seems to want to open to the West." Bryza noted that the Russian stranglehold over the transit routes from Central Asia was one of the obstacles for expansion of cooperation with Turkmenistan. Bryza also highlighted that Russia bought gas from Central Asia for $100 per 1000 cubic meters and sold it to Europe for up to $300. He also stressed that the U.S. government was concerned over Russia's expansion in the European energy market.

STATE AND OPPOSITION MEDIA BOTH LOVE JAZZ
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¶3. (U) On April 18, pro-government website TURKMENISTAN.RU (Russian, English) posted an article on Ari Roland Jazz Quartet's embassy-sponsored visit to Turkmenistan. The article accurately noted that the group visited in honor of Jazz Appreciation Month and stated the group's performance dates in other regions of Turkmenistan. Based on the embassy press release, it gave a short background on the group and stated that all performances were free and open to the public. (Note: Audiences are typically selected by

authorities rather than open to the public. End note.) The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,091) covered the group's opening performance in Ashgabat, emphasizing that it was very successful and noting enthusiastic applause from the audience. On April 21, the state TV-4 Channel, which broadcasts in English, aired a follow-up program with video scenes from the performance and a personal interview of each group member.

¶4. (U) On April 24, opposition website www.chrono-tm.org posted an article on Ari Roland Jazz Quartet's performance in Dashoguz. The article emphasized the people of Dashoguz had not seen foreign performances for many years. The article reported that the majority of the audience was young adults and that the performance lasted for more than two hours. It praised the audience's reaction to the music and noted that the local music school's teachers and students performed with the group. The article highlighted that after the performance many students spoke with the group. It emphasized that everyone left the theater falling in love with jazz and hoping that foreign concert tours would become regular events. The article, referring to comments by the theater's staff, stated that for the first time in years an audience came to the theater by their own free will and watched a performance with interest and joy. The article underlined that government officials commonly filled theater performances based on the late President Niyazov's poetry with military conscripts and high school students.

ETHNIC LINK HELPS YELLOW BIRD GROUP'S COVERAGE
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¶5. (U) The April 4 "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,891) article on the Apache-American dancing group Yellow Bird presented a very positive picture of the group while making numerous allusions



to a Turkmen/Native American ethnic link. The article accurately described the background of the group and general information on its future activities in Turkmenistan. (Comment: Media in Turkmenistan usually do not provide information about post-sponsored performances outside of Ashgabat. This creates problems in advertising events. End Comment.) The piece noted a shared ethnic link. Quotes and information from the group members implied to readers that Yellow Bird shared this opinion. On April 12, state weekly "Ashgabat" (Turkmen, circ. 16,191) published an article on Yellow Bird, with a color picture from their performance in Ashgabat and included their interview with the newspaper correspondent. The questions were mainly about the group's background and their impression of Turkmenistan and its people. In the conclusion, the author expressed her great appreciation to the Cultural Affairs Assistant and Media Assistant of the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy for helping to interview the group in the Turkmen language. (Note: The article accurately detailed the names and titles of the embassy employees, a rare occurence. End Note.) State TV played video excerpts from Yellow Bird performances for Turkmenistan's Theater and Folklore Festival from April 1-7, along with interviews with the group members at the cultural programs. (Note: State Watan TV news program inaccurately presented the group member Tony Duncan as a member of an Ethiopian dance group -- a likely editing error only. End Note.)

UNITED STATES AID AND OUTREACH IGNORED
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¶6. (U) State media ignored Congressman Peter Hoekstra's April 4-5 visit to discuss bilateral cooperation and regional security issues. Independent website www.turkmenpress.com reprinted the embassy press release from April 6.

¶7. (U) Post hosted a leading specialist in English Language Teaching, Dr. Donna Brinton, May 11-23. Brinton's sessions included talks on the process of accrediting institutes of higher education and curriculum standards to representatives of the Supreme Council for Science and Technology, the Ministry of Education, and National Institute for Education. Brinton held a week of evening seminars, day-long conferences on interactive teaching methodology for local teachers, and daily presentations for both professors and students

at Turkmen State University, the Azadi World Languages Institute and Turkmen-Turkish University. Brinton also traveled to Dashoguz, Mary and Lebap, where she consulted with local teachers and education experts. State media gave no coverage during this long visit, even though educational programs and reform have featured prominently in other coverage.

¶8. (U) The donation of laboratory equipment valued at $85,000 by the U.S. government to the National Criminal Research Center of Turkmenistan's Ministry of the Interior on May 10 and a two-day Proliferation Awareness Seminar from 25-26, held by technical specialists from the Monterey Institute of International Studies also failed to attract state media attention. Despite the presence of representatives from Turkmenistan's ministries of Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, State Customs Service, State Border Service and Trade and Consumer Cooperation, no state outlets covered these events.

¶9. (U) On April 22, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 28,091) published an article about Abu Seyyed Mosque. The article described the history and restoration of the mosque but did not mention that an Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation grant in 2001 funded the mosque's preservation.

State Daily Bans Coverage of Global Youth Service Day
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¶10. (U) On April 24, government website www.turkmenistan.gov.tm posted an article on a Global Youth Service Day project organized by exchange program alumni, but the same story never ran in print media. This project gathered young volunteers to the Akdere recreation area near the capital of Ashgabat to pick up litter. The article praised the ecological event and recognized supporters from local schools and educational institutions, the majority of whom were volunteers from IREX, ACCELS, U.S. Embassy's Information Resource Center, U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Section staff, and Peace Corps volunteers in Turkmenistan. The article accurately stated that many people conduct such acts annually on worldwide "Global Youth Service Day." (Note: PAO gave opening remarks and



actively took part in the event. End Note.) The author of the article was a correspondent from state daily "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 34,701) and, despite her best efforts, she could not publish it in the daily or other state print outlets. (Comment: The acting editor-in-chief of the daily justified the ban by saying that all news focused on President Berdimuhamedov's visit to Russia, so the event would be of no interest to readers. End Comment.)

COMMENT
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¶11. (SBU) After a sudden wave of favorable media coverage in March, post was surprised to find greater limits on the coverage of embassy programs and events during April. However, DAS Romanowski's visit in early May reached a new level of positive and extensive coverage. Given that the Ministry of Culture, which oversees all state media broadcasting, has been under scrutiny and re-organization from the president's office, the future of coverage of U.S. government-sponsored events remains unclear. In May, a pattern emerged of positive, broad coverage for important visitors, events, and meetings. Meanwhile, smaller workshops, programs, and regional events usually received no attention. Recent coverage of embassy events and programs still reflects the government's continued use of the media more as a political tool than an information source. Even so, state media usually conveyed core U.S. messages. End Comment.

HOAGLAND